

Prologue

A Perfect Storm

The structure of the book

Having laid out the historical and sociological context against which the book has been written, I now turn to a sketch of the journey that lies in front of you. I have not attempted to provide a comprehensive guide to community engagement after Christendom. I have rather taken three different approaches to community engagement after Christendom that will help us take our ambiguous context seriously and free up our imagination from the heritage of Christendom.

Part I: On reading Scripture “again”

In Part I, I explore the task of reading Scripture “again.” Our reading of Scripture after Christendom is taking place in a new context. Churches and church-related agencies are no longer “in control,” but are still implicated in various ways and to varying degrees in the exercise of political and social power. They are carrying a theological and scriptural imagination still shaped by Christendom. So, I begin in chapter 1 with the theme “Implicated in the Exercise of power, While No Longer ‘In Control’” as the context for reading Scripture “again.”

But what do I mean by the term “in control”? Churches in their Christendom-shaped relationship with government had access to diverse levels of power and influence. In referring to a location of being “in control,” I am not suggesting that their access to power was always at the upper end of the spectrum. The terminology of “in control” is a shorthand for this historical connection. I also use it to refer to a Christendom mindset that is still being carried forward by many churches.

In discussing the question of reading Scripture in the context, I start with the Anabaptist movement. The interruption by the Anabaptists of the relationship between the church and the political order in the sixteenth century as a result of reading Scripture “again” provides insight into some of the issues at stake in such reading. I then draw attention to a tradition of Christian radicalism and provide examples of reading the Scripture against the grain of Christendom, suggesting an imaginative engagement with Scripture, rather than looking for biblical principles, or theological models.

In chapter 2, “Stories Read ‘Otherwise,’” I turn to the First Testament (Old Testament).¹ I revisit the stories of Joseph, Esther, and Daniel, read as narratives and provocations that offer opportunities for challenging readings shaped by Christendom and offer interpretations that are “otherwise” to the ones that have often been taught to us. These are accounts of people who were in positions of power without being “in

¹ Throughout the book I use the terminology of “First Testament (Old Testament)” and “Second Testament (New Testament).” While the traditional terminology of Old Testament and New Testament is unsatisfactory in its supersessionist framing I revisit the stories of Joseph, Esther, and Daniel, read as on an alternative terminology. I have chosen this somewhat laborious labelling to assist those reading the book who are not familiar with the theological debates on this topic of their relationship, there is not widespread agreement in the Christian community

control.” What can we learn from these stories about the risks and possibilities of faithfulness in such contexts, the nature and desirability of political success, and the limits of what can be achieved in exercising power in imperial contexts? As a bridge to the next chapter I conclude by exploring the critical stance towards the monarchy in Israel’s approach to kingship, informed by the prophet Samuel’s critical response to Israel’s call for a king.

The Second Testament (New Testament) was also written in a time of empire and bears the marks of that context, though we have often not stopped to think about the implications of that location for the way we read it. In chapter 3, “Teaching and Performing a Different Kingdom,” I draw attention to accounts by the Gospel writers of Jesus’ ministry, teaching, and performance of the “kingdom of God.”

In chapter 4, “Exile: Community Engagement in a Shifting Location,” I take up the theme of exile as a location that shifted its meaning and significance for community engagement over time. I start with Jeremiah’s letter to the exiles in Babylon and explore the development and nuancing of that theme through the Second Testament (New Testament) and the early church. Thinking about this shifting location in the scriptural accounts of exile helps us pay attention to the tensions of community engagement in undertaking prophetic critique of political power, seeking the flourishing of the city, caring for strangers, and undertaking the administration of the empire, all this in finding our identity as resident aliens and sojourners.

Part II: “Anticipating” a post-Christendom community engagement

I turn in Part II to Anabaptist history and theology. Here I narrate the biography and discuss the theology of Pilgram Marpeck, an Anabaptist public servant, and to explore their relevance to engagement in a pluralist political order. In chapter 5, “Pilgram Marpeck: A Biographical Account of Anabaptist Community Engagement,” I trace the life and ministry of Marpeck, a sixteenth-century Anabaptist whose work as a public servant and theology challenges the stereotype of Anabaptism as a stance of withdrawal from the community. In chapter 6, “Theologically ‘Anticipating’ Post-Christendom,” I explore Marpeck’s theological arguments on community engagement, and suggest that he anticipates in an interesting way a post-Christendom context. I take up Marpeck’s critique of Christendom in chapter 7, “Community Engagement after Marpeck,” and explore how his theological argument relates to current Mennonite theology on the relationship between the Christian church and government, while noting its contemporary relevance for Christian churches and church-related agencies in Australia.

Part III: Community engagement on the way out of Christendom

In Part III, I provide some accounts of church and church-related agencies’ experience in community engagement in Australia over recent decades, for insights into how these agencies are negotiating post-Christendom, shaped as it is by a neoliberal contracting policy environment. The Australian context may be strange to readers in other Anglophone countries. The provocation of bringing the transition beyond Christendom in Australia to the attention of readers in different national contexts may help them to look at their own experience of post-Christendom in a fresh light, and think about the possibility that a relationship that you have taken for granted as being necessarily the way things are turns out to be quite contingent.

In presenting these stories of community engagement, I have organized them using the themes of risk, advocacy, hospitality, and presence. Nearly half of the stories I tell in this section of the book are about involvement by churches, and church-related agencies, with refugees and asylum seekers. This focus wasn't part of my original plan for the book. As I progressed with the writing a couple of factors worked in tandem to bring about this result. The first was my own involvement over the past two decades in community support and policy advocacy for refugees and asylum seekers. The second was that as governments were taking an increasingly hostile approach to refugees, churches and their agencies because of their transnational connections and theological commitments were finding themselves at odds with government policy.

The role of neoliberalism in driving the shift to contracting has had an important influence in shaping community engagement by churches and their agencies in recent decades.² I explore the risks that contracting raises for church-related agencies in chapter 8. I show how contracting with government, in both its sacral and bureaucratic modes of operation, can lead church-related agencies into becoming an extension of the state, losing their fundamental theological and ecclesial identity. I draw attention to the value of theological reflection in decision-making processes by agencies on whether and how to engage in community service.

In the remaining three chapters I present approaches to community engagement as forms of practice that can contribute to human flourishing. I start in chapter 9, "Advocacy: Challenging Government while Exiting Christendom," exploring how a particular form of advocacy became possible in an unexpected way following the introduction by government of contracting with church-related agencies. My account illustrates how relationships of trust, friendship, and shared commitments across church-related national coordinating agencies worked to support advocacy against the grain of a neoliberal-contracting environment. In contrast, the story of Love Makes a Way (LMAW) documents a confrontational form of advocacy shaped by a commitment to patient non-violence and Christian worship, that led to church leaders being arrested in advocating for the claims of the most vulnerable—children of asylum seekers.

In chapter 10, "Practicing Hospitality Toward Refugees and Asylum Seekers," I direct our attention to the exercise of hospitality by church agencies undertaken against the grain of a government policy based on creating fear of refugees and asylum seekers. Here community engagement has been undertaken in conscious opposition to government policy that has demonized asylum seekers. I explore various ways hospitality towards refugees has been provided by church-related agencies in Australia independent of government funding.

I illustrate the theme of chapter 11, "Presence on the Margins," with two case studies of agencies closely connected to local church communities. The Wayside Chapel, a parish mission of the Uniting Church in the inner city of Sydney, is committed to developing a community in which there is no division between "us and them," expressed in a vision of love over hate. Doveton Baptist Church is a small, struggling Baptist congregation located on the economic and social margins of Melbourne. Its congregation is comprised of residents who make their limited resources available to provide space and support to sustain the flourishing of the life of those they live with. I conclude with an Epilogue,

² On neoliberalism and the church, see Hargaden, *Theological Ethics in a Neoliberal Age*, and Hynd, "The Impact of Neo-liberalism"

“Lingering with the Beatitudes,” that reads the Beatitudes as a call to shape our community engagement as a patient presence in the transition beyond Christendom.

Throughout the book I have directed my attention to the Christian movement’s approach to community engagement. I have not attempted to provide detailed guidance, but rather have sought to free up the imagination of Christians in approaching this critical dimension of their discipleship.